‘The Rich Don’t Play by the Rules. So Why Should I?’

Why petty theft might be the new political protest.

April 22, 2026

By Nadja Spiegelman, Hasan Piker and Jia Tolentino
Produced by Vishakha Darbha

See more of our coverage in your search results.

Add The New York Times on Google

When does shoplifting become an act of political protest? The Opinion culture editor Nadja Spiegelman is calling this microlooting, and it describes the phenomenon of people stealing small things from big corporations like Whole Foods. The New Yorker writer Jia Tolentino and the political commentator Hasan Piker join Spiegelman for a lively discussion on what’s behind this trend and where it might lead.

Below is a transcript of an episode of “The Opinions.” We recommend listening to it in its original form for the full effect. You can do so using the player above or on the NYTimes app, Apple, Spotify, Amazon Music, YouTube, iHeartRadio or wherever you get your podcasts.

The transcript has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Nadja Spiegelman: I’m proposing a new term: Microlooting. People are taking small things from big corporations and they’re feeling justified. But is it a slippery slope? What’s going on with our moral code?

Thank you both so much for being here with me to talk about this. I want to start with a little exercise, just about our own morals. Would you share your Netflix password?

Jia Tolentino: I do. With anyone.

Hasan Piker: I also do. Well, for the longest time I actually had someone else’s Netflix password. That was my primary access to Netflix.

Spiegelman: And now you share your own?

Piker: Yeah.

Spiegelman: Would you get around a paywall on an article you’re trying to read?

Piker: I do it every day on my stream.

Tolentino: I support it when people do it for my own work. I say, go off, use the Wayback Machine.

Spiegelman: Would you pirate music from an indie band?

Tolentino: Is it 2005 and I’m using LimeWire? Because yes.

Spiegelman: I feel like every millennial has at some point.

Tolentino: I mean, I feel like, fundamentally, Spotify is kind of deleterious to the musician livelihood, and I use that, but then I go to the shows.

Piker: Yeah, I’m pro-piracy all the way, like, across the board. Would you pirate a car? Yes. You know, if you could.

Spiegelman: What would it mean to pirate a car?

Piker: It was just a classic thing back in the day. The government-funded antipiracy initiatives would be like: Would you steal a car? I’m like, yeah, sure. If I could get away with it, if it was as easy as pirating intellectual property, I would do it.

Spiegelman: Would you dine and dash from your local diner?

Tolentino: Never. Never! Tip 35 percent. Come on.

Piker: No, I wouldn’t do that. If I saw somebody doing that, I’d probably pay for their meal.

Spiegelman: Yeah. Would you steal a book from the library?

Tolentino: Never.

Piker: No.

Spiegelman: Would you steal from the Louvre?

Piker: Yes.

Tolentino: I would not be logistically capable of executing such a fact, but would I cheer on every news story of people that I see doing it? Absolutely.

Piker: I think it’s cool. We’ve got to get back to cool crimes like that: bank robberies, stealing priceless artifacts, things of that nature. I feel like that’s way cooler than the 7,000th new cryptocurrency scheme that people are engaging in.

Spiegelman: Would you steal from Whole Foods?

Tolentino: Yes. And I have, under very specific circumstances. I will say, I think that stealing from a big box store — I’ll just state my platform — it’s neither very significant as a moral wrong, nor is it significant in any way as protest or direct action. But I did steal from Whole Foods on several occasions.

I’ve been involved in a neighborhood mutual aid group since 2021. And so every week I would go get groceries for Miss Nancy, my now family friend who lived nearby, and she wanted to go to Whole Foods. She wanted food from Whole Foods. And I was like, OK, great. And so I’d be getting Miss Nancy all of her groceries, and then I would finish, and I’d be like, oh my God, four lemons, I forgot four lemons. And on several occasions I was like, I’m just going to go back, grab those four lemons and get the hell out.

Piker: You should go to prison.

Tolentino: I know. You think they’re going to ban me?

Piker: They should throw you in jail. [Laughs.]

Tolentino: But I didn’t feel bad about it at all.

Spiegelman: And was part of it because of how you feel about Whole Foods as a corporation?

Tolentino: Yeah. It already felt like a bit of a compromise. At the time I was like, I had not been to Whole Foods. I had a bit more consumer discipline about where I was spending my money then, and I already felt like I was in the hole, even by shopping there. And it certainly felt, in a utilitarian sense, I was like, this is not a big deal. Right, guys?

Piker: I'm pro stealing from big corporations, because they steal quite a bit more from their own workers. However, one thing that might even help your ethical dilemma is the fact that the automated process that they design, these companies know will increase shrink, right?

So it's actually factored in. The lemons that you stole are factored into the bottom line of these mega-corporations regardless. And they still end up having increased profit margins, because they no longer have to pay the cashiers that they used to hire, as opposed to this automated system, knowing full well that people are still going to be able to steal a lot more efficiently, as a matter of fact, through the automated process.

Tolentino: Totally. I was looking things up, and shrinkage is roughly equal internally as externally. These companies expect it from their employees that they are disenfranchising constantly.

Spiegelman: But what about the argument that if everyone just starts stealing wantonly from these self-checkout machines, Whole Foods will eventually raise the prices?

Piker: Yeah, chaos. Full chaos. Let's go. I mean, look, I'm in favor of fast and free buses and also government-owned storefronts. And two of those policies, the mayor of this beautiful city is currently working on.

Spiegelman: Would you encourage stealing in the same way from a Zohran Mamdani-run, city-owned grocery store with lower prices, and why?

Piker: No, I would not, because I feel like that's taxpayer-funded, it's union labor, and the prices are also adjusted regardless.

Tolentino: I think that hypothetical is interesting, right? Because if you look at it from a categorical imperative type thing, what if everybody did this? The converse is, oh, what if every major grocery chain stole from workers and consumers? And that is basically true, right? It speaks to the thing where harm committed by the individual, strangely, continually draws more ire than the same harm being committed by a structure. And so I kind of am inclined toward this. Everyone, try it. See what happens.

Spiegelman: Yeah.

Piker: Well, I — ironically enough — I don't personally do it. I never do it. When I was younger, I stole some Pokémon cards from a friend and my father punished me. And it was such a harrowing experience that I literally can't even steal a candy bar. When we were in college, a lot of my friends used to love doing that. You know, getting drunk, going to the gas station, five-finger discount. I would never participate in it. And I still can't, to this day, participate in it. I'm just saying that I personally don't really care. If someone needs the food; they should absolutely steal it.

Spiegelman: There's one thing that's stealing when you are a teenager and you want the adrenaline rush. And part of it is about testing the rules and getting away with something.

But what I’m seeing on TikTok and social media is people saying that they’re stealing from Whole Foods not just for the thrill of it, but out of a feeling of anger and moral justification. Because the rich don’t play by the rules, so why should I? And Jeff Bezos has too much money — he’s a billionaire — so why should I have to pay for organic avocados?

My friends and I have started calling this microlooting, because it has a slight political valence to theft, as opposed to just the thrill of getting away with something. Have you noticed this around you online? Have you noticed more people talking about stealing in this way?

Tolentino: I mean, I have not seen people talking about microlooting or such, whatever action that this is, online. But I think it kind of speaks to an attenuation of the tactical language of direct action. It doesn’t work for me as a form of direct action because it’s concealed, right?

Any successful direct action in history has to be ostentatious, has to make itself known, it’s ideally collective. And this is sort of necessarily individual and hidden. But I’m like, oh, great, let’s think of ways to take this energy and let’s move it into some other thing.

I think it’s great that the valence of property is on the table as something to be toyed with, in terms of direct action. We’ve forgotten that there is a long and storied history of sabotage and engagement with property destruction, even, which is abhorrent to people.

You remember in 2020, the Gucci, Chanel stuff in SoHo, when that was looted. That looms so much larger in many Bloomberg liberals’ imaginations as profoundly more violent in some ways than the original action being protested, right? And I find that really interesting.

Spiegelman: Yeah. I was thinking about the Boston Tea Party as part of, like, that’s a political destruction of property. And yet, right now — I agree with you, the looting around the 2020 protests was such a huge talking point. It made people so uncomfortable. And I’m curious: What do you think the root of that is?

Tolentino: I was thinking that thieves are actually quite highly valorized in narrative. Aladdin, famously;

Spiegelman: Robin Hood, Jean Valjean.

Tolentino: Jean Valjean. We understand, it’s well within the collective consciousness, that stealing for need or purpose — it’s something that we understand and feel quite friendly toward. And I think if someone were, let’s say, walking out of Whole Foods with an IKEA bag of whatever and giving it to the people sheltering underneath the scaffolding at the jail going up close by in Brooklyn, most people would agree.

If someone were to be stealing with a purpose, we love that in America. We do. We can love it again. We just have to do it with a purpose.

Spiegelman: I feel part of what I’m seeing around me is that people feel like the laws are immoral. The rich don’t play by the rules. We live in a society where there are billionaires; where the top 1 percent holds 32 percent of the net worth and the bottom 50 percent holds 2.5 percent.

So, at some point, if the laws don’t feel moral, do you start to question your own sense of having to abide by them?

Tolentino: Of course.

Piker: Yeah. I wanted to work off a point that you were making. This was also something that was addressed in a previous New York Times podcast that I did with Ross Douthat, where I brought up the concept of adventurism.

In the Marxist tradition, adventurism is the action that is oftentimes decentralized. Oftentimes, anarchists will say, “This is the propaganda of the deed.” The action itself, no matter how violent or how disruptive, is justifiable because the disruption is the point. I believe in the power of organized labor and labor militancy, and building these structures of power so that we can actually make more effective change, more longstanding change.

So, concepts such as microlooting indicate that there is an energy there, just like you said. And yet, many Americans, I think, are totally oblivious to this political language. They lack political education, they lack the class consciousness to recognize their position in society, and lack the capacity, unfortunately, to engage in some kind of organized disruption that would be infinitely more effective.

Tolentino: What you were saying about people lacking the language and the organizing structure to engage; in the obvious thing to do — if you want to chip into the Whole Foods/Amazon mega structure of exploitation — is to unionize, to work at a Whole Foods and form a union. And I think the first one was formed recently, in Philadelphia.

Microlooting — it feels akin to posting about something. As an atomized individual action, it’s useless. It’s much harder to get a job and accept $17.50 an hour and then to organize your colleagues, a process that takes years and is often unsuccessful.

The thing about actual collective, direct action — it’s so much harder. And it often doesn’t profit you whatsoever, such as, you know, me getting an extra 10 bucks by grabbing my extra loaf of bread for Miss Nancy.

We are also lazy as humans; we’re also selfish. We’ve lost not only the language and the union density and the structure to engage in things like this, but we have also lost the muscle that is built up to be able to engage in these sorts of things. We’ve lost the rooms in which these things are planned.

Piker: And the confidence. I think we’ve lost the confidence within ourselves, because there is not a lot of action like this. And in the absence of that, we lack the willpower, because we don’t even know what that would look like.

Tolentino: And the climate protests in Europe tend to be more militant than the ones that are here. And they are blocking roadways. These things that are even, objectively, completely nonviolent forms of obstruction and interference that don’t even involve property destruction, but merely the interruption of the capital flow of the workday, are criminalized to shocking degrees, to me, even in Europe.

I guess I’m saying that the lack of courage is maybe a rational response to the way these actions are treated, and the popular consciousness, as well as by the criminal justice system. But they shouldn’t be.

Spiegelman: I want to get back a little bit to the anger underneath this. In 1965, C.E.O.s were paid 21 times as much as the average worker. In 2024, C.E.O.s were paid 281 times as much as the average worker. Some of this is coming from a feeling that the rules, the social contract is broken. And then there’s also the slippery slope of what happens if we completely break the social contract and no one plays by the rules anymore. And I wonder where you two see the interplay of those two ideas.

Piker: Well, the rules are already designed in a way where, if you steal from the poor, you become rich; if you steal from the wealthy, you go to prison. So there’s only one direction where you can do unlimited theft and erode the social contract for the 99 percent. There’s an invisibility baked into the system that allows the wealthy to engage in this behavior. Because it’s a cliché at this point, but wage theft is the most consequential amount of theft that takes place in the United States of America.

A similar invisibility exists in structural violence, as opposed to individual acts of violence, as well. If it’s a police officer engaging someone violently, the automatic assumption from the average person is: Oh, that’s probably a criminal, they probably deserved it. But if there’s any circumstance where someone else is fighting back against police — like in a normal protest environment, for example — ultimately, most people assume that this is chaotic. That’s a chaotic situation. And that it is born out of the escalations from the protesters themselves. Even if, as regular citizens, we’re infinitely closer to those exercising their First Amendment rights than to those with the power stamping out people exercising their free speech rights. We never look at systemic forms of violence, and we don’t look at systemic forms of theft, in the same way that we do as individuals breaking that social contract.

Tolentino: In my ideal world — what we are talking about, the one theft being inescapable and hegemonic and completely oppressive, and then people trying to get a little bit of it back through stealing from Whole Foods or whatever.

The ideal world is not one in which this continues and this increases to somehow even it out, right? The ideal world is one in which the theft from above is broken by regulatory means and/or bottom-up means, like unionization.

Spiegelman: You were just talking about not being like, we should encourage wanton theft across the board, but that we should try to fight against the theft that comes from the top.

It feels difficult right now to hope for regulatory change when that would come from the government, let’s say. And a lot of the billionaires, like Bezos and Tim Cook and Elon Musk, are given a seat at the table in terms of the government itself, when billionaires themselves pay much lower tax rates than most Americans. My producer was just giving me this fact: Eighty-eight corporations made $105 billion in profits in 2025, including Tesla, Southwest, United, Live Nation and Disney. And they collectively paid income taxes of zero dollars.

Tolentino: Right. I mean, it’s a far more consequential withdrawal of resources and trust from the public sphere to do that, to talk about any individual thing that any person has ever done. I mean, the top 1 percent of Americans, 20 percent of their income is withheld from reporting every year, as just a standing statistic. And that’s not even a corporate structure. That’s just ordinary rich people, you know?

Spiegelman: And recently, a worker allegedly set fire to a warehouse owned by Kimberly Clark — to protest low wages. Is that an effective form of political protest, or is that purely violent?

Tolentino: No, that — you’ve got to be tactical. Mike Davis wrote about this: It’s not the action; it’s the context in which it exists. And do I think that some sort of fire could hypothetically be framed within a collective action that is tactically useful? Yes. Does a disgruntled guy burning down the warehouse do it for me in terms of effective political

action? Not at all. But I do ——

Piker: Sabotage has played a formative role in labor unions ——

Tolentino: In everything.

Piker: Yeah. But if it's conducted unilaterally, then it's entirely different.

Tolentino: That's an individual action. And if he could have gotten away with it, without being caught — I mean, I didn't follow this case very closely, but anything done by an individual on a kind of primarily emotional whim — that's not the point. That's not the point.

Spiegelman: But then when you feel this much anger — and it doesn't feel like there's hope for it to be changed in a regulatory way — I think that's when you get to things like Luigi Mangione, who is accused of killing the C.E.O. of United Healthcare, and there being an outpouring of glee for murder online, because it feels like, finally, someone can actually do something about health care.

I think 41 percent of Gen Z-ers felt that murder was morally justified. But it's scary to be in a society where people feel that murder is morally justified. And I'm curious how we thread that line.

Piker: Yeah. Friedrich Engels wrote about the concept of social murder. And Brian Thompson, as the United Healthcare C.E.O., was engaging in a tremendous amount of social murder. The systematized forms of violence, the structural violence of poverty, the for-profit, paywalled system of health care in this country — and the consequences of that are tremendous amounts of pain, tremendous amounts of violence, tremendous amounts of deaths. And that was a fascinating story for me, because Americans are very draconian about crime and punishment. They're very black and white on this issue.

And yet, because of the pervasive pain that the private health care system had created for the average American, I saw so many people immediately understand why this death had taken place. Even before they knew who the shooter was or what the motive was, we had universalized this pain so much so that virtually every American has a similar experience. A shared experience, where they have a loved one who spent their last days — instead of spending them with their family — spending it on the phone, talking to their health care provider to maybe get a little bit of economic respite so they don't carry on medical debt for their next generation, for their next of kin.

That's a harrowing process for a lot of people. And for them, that is murder; for them, that is torture. And that is the reason why, I think, the reaction to Luigi Mangione, especially by younger generations, was not so negative.

Tolentino: It's also worth saying there are not that many health care C.E.O.s; there are not that many industries that are as universally understood as merchants of social murder, of structural violence upon people. And it was as if the language appeared lit up within people who had never articulated it out loud. There are so few industries — maybe that is singularly the one — that touch everyone, that harm nearly everyone. Even when Charlie Kirk was murdered, I kept seeing reactions online like, "Leftists are celebrating," and I was like — all my friends were just like — yikes, this is going to get so bad, you know?

And I don't think we've turned into a culture where murder is sanctioned. I think that we have turned into a culture where private health care is so profoundly immoral that people

had a very particular reaction to Brian Thompson’s murder, right? I don’t actually think, necessarily, that we have come to a place where targeted assassination is seen like it’s OK.

Spiegelman: I wonder with something like murder, like the murder of a health care C.E.O., is it just a release valve for anger, or is it actually effective political action? Has anything shifted in terms of health care in this country because of that?

Tolentino: I felt enormously frustrated in the weeks following that. I don’t know why I thought that Democrats would immediately take this up as pushing a unified message toward universal health care. I don’t know why I expected that. I don’t know why I was disappointed that it didn’t happen.

Piker: Elizabeth Warren was one of the politicians who did it, to her credit.

Tolentino: Sure. But you know what I mean. I don’t know why I expected that, but I do not think that it was effective political action. I do think it was an effective act of political consciousness-raising, but I don’t think that’s action at all. I do think it was served up for someone to just spike that ball over the other side, and that did not happen at all. And I find that is one of the most egregious missed opportunities that we have seen in recent political history.

Piker: I go back and forth on this. Democrats are failing. Are they feckless because they’re just bad at politics, or is it something more indecent? And that their fecklessness is simply cover for their ulterior motives, which is participating in this grand design. They’re funded by the same corporate lobbyists that Republicans are funded by, especially when it comes to private health care providers, and they have a vested interest in the continuation of private health care. There is consensus in American politics, when it comes to the continuation of the private health care system, that the system must be private. This also touches on something that I wanted to address that you said, Jia: You were saying that Americans are not used to murder, right? Americans are not on board with murder.

I wanted to push back on that at the moment, because I do think we are a profoundly violent culture. In some ways, Charlie Kirk’s assassination was not unique. School shootings are happening all the time, and we have actually decided, almost collectively, that it’s just another byproduct of American existence.

Spiegelman: I know part of the issue is that Americans have lost a lot of trust in their government. I have this other statistic here, that in 1964, 77 percent of Americans trusted the government. In 2025, 17 percent of Americans trust the government. And yet, there’s some political action that feels hopeful, like Mamdani’s policies for New York. Is this kind of change achievable through the mechanism of politics? Does it line up with Mamdani’s politics?

Piker: Absolutely. I think that this global design of capital that we have seems like a behemoth that is impossible to defeat. And that, obviously, discourages a lot of people from taking action. One of the immediate reflections is the fact that we don’t really have a democratic process any longer, and people don’t even have that confidence in the democratic process, because the wishes of the masses are rarely ever represented by our elected representatives.

There are many different instances where this has become reality. There was an election cycle that just took place, only two years ago, where there was a genocide that was

happening alongside that. And that was the perfect opportunity to show Americans that your voices do matter, right? And yet, the Democratic Party chose not to lean into that real mobilization — about 3,500 college campus protesters were arrested in the process.

And now we write think pieces about why there aren’t any college campus protesters. “Where are the antiwar protesters?” Over and over again. Well, we did it. The government succeeded in undermining the people’s right to protest, and the confidence that they have, by refusing to listen to their demands.

So they succeeded in that regard. However, while this system of global capital seems like a giant that is impossible to tackle, it’s also very fragile.

Tolentino: Part of the way that this feels weighted on both sides, to me, is that if the material conditions of an average person’s life are ameliorated by a redistribution of wealth, then the conditions become more possible to take time and take risks and organize, right?

I think one of the reasons, obviously, that people don’t have time to attend multiple weeknight meetings, or organize something in their community is because they have to work too long. They have to pick up their kids; they pay so much for child care. There’s no margin for anything. And I think, when you’re talking about Mamdani, when there’s a political program that is about improving, about giving people margins for individual prosocial, civic action, then a whole realm of possibilities and energy and ability and interest will begin to regrow that won’t be redirected into, like, OK, here’s my seven minutes of downtime; I’m going to use it for scrolling or whatever. Not that I would know anything about that myself.

Spiegelman: Not that any of us have used our seven minutes of downtime to scroll.

Piker: And the thing with Zohran is that he does instill confidence in governance all of a sudden. People for the first time ever see someone actually making that positive change, and it brings more confidence, and it creates an environment where people can demand more Zohrans.

That’s why I always say I want to let a thousand Zohrans bloom all around the country. Because there are people like Zohran out there, and they’re just waiting to be elected, and waiting to come into a position of power and show the rest of the country that, no, you can actually do things. You can do good governance.

Spiegelman: I love that. So a lot of what we’ve been talking about is taking what little power we have and trying to make it bigger, trying to take back some of the power for ourselves. And so I just wanted to end by asking you: What’s one thing that you think should be OK but currently isn’t OK?

Piker: I.P. theft. Stealing movies, things like that.

Tolentino: One thing that should be legal that isn’t — it’s interesting, because I have to regularly explain this stuff to a small child, and have so thoroughly explained to her that some things are against the rules, but they’re OK, depending on who you are. And some things are not against the rules, but they’re not OK. There are so many perfectly legal things I do regularly that I find mildly immoral. Like getting iced coffee in a plastic cup. I find that to be a profoundly selfish, immoral, collectively destructive action. I have taken so many planes for so many pleasure reasons; I have acted in so many selfish ways that are not only legal, but they’re sanctioned and they’re unbelievably valorized, culturally.

So, maybe things like blowing up a pipeline, let’s say that.

Spiegelman: I can relate to what you were saying, Jia. It is so hard to live ethically in an unethical society. And also, there are so many moral compromises I make every day.

Tolentino: I do so many immoral things every day.

Spiegelman: I’m constantly acting in ways that don’t align with my belief system. And constantly having to justify that, like ordering in food when it’s raining out.

There are just so many moments when I’m like, my comfort is more important than someone bringing me food through the rain. And it doesn’t feel good. But it is part of living — I mean, no one’s making me do that, but it is part of the way in which we live in our society.

Tolentino: And it’s so incentivized. It’s splashed all over the subway ads. It’s just like, “Ladies, be selfish tonight,” you know? It’s wild, yeah.

Spiegelman: What is one thing that shouldn’t be OK, but currently is?

Piker: So many things. Extraction of surplus labor value.

Spiegelman: Great. You went really slowly with it. I appreciate that.

Piker: Exploitation.

Tolentino: Yeah. Anything above Mao. I think New York should charge people to park on the street. I mean, I park on the street, but I think that is an access to a large amount of public money that we should be taking.

Spiegelman: Like, everyone who does street parking?

Piker: You’re going to get assassinated for that take.

Tolentino: I know, but I think it’s true.

Piker: Someone’s going to fight you.

Tolentino: I think it’s true. I also think private schools should be mostly illegal.

Piker: Oh, I agree with that. That’s a great one. Yes.

Spiegelman: You are going to piss off all the drivers of New York City with your public ——

Tolentino: Driving their kids to private school. Yeah. It’s a huge problem, yeah.

Spiegelman: OK. So, because we have talked about so many different things, let’s give a sort of smash or pass, yes-or-no-style summary. Steal from Whole Foods?

Tolentino: Sure.

Piker: Sure.

Spiegelman: Burn down your employer’s warehouse because you’re mad about wage theft?

Tolentino: No.

Piker: No, my lawyers are telling me to answer in the negative.

Spiegelman: Murder the C.E.O. of a health care company?

Piker: Also no.

Tolentino: No.

Spiegelman: So we have a yes on stealing from Whole Foods, microlooting.

Tolentino: But the real yes is get a job there, spend three years being a salt and organize the union.

Spiegelman: Which I think is a true, better answer than justify your wheel of Brie for yourself.

Tolentino: But that’s fine, too.

Spiegelman: Jia, Hasan, thank you so much for being here. This has been such an interesting conversation. It’s been a real pleasure to talk with you both.